



IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH & WELFARE

Bureau of Community and Environmental Health

Fish, Mercury and Your Health

Why should I eat fish?

Fish is a great source of protein, vitamins, and minerals. Fish is a low-cost, low-fat food. The oils in fish are important for unborn and breastfed babies as well as the whole family. Eating a variety of fish helps to reduce your chances of stroke or heart attack.

Are all fish safe to eat?

No. Some fish have toxic chemicals such as mercury in them because of chemicals in the water where they swim. Nursing mothers and women who are or may become pregnant should not eat fish high in mercury. High mercury fish include swordfish, tuna steaks, shark, king mackerel, and golden and white snapper.

What about canned tuna?

Canned tuna is a good source of nutrition. Nursing mothers and women who are or may become pregnant can eat up to 6 ounces of tuna or other fish each week. Children under 6 years of age can eat up to 3 ounces of tuna or other fish each week.

Can I eat store-bought fish like canned tuna or fish my friends and family catch?

If you eat canned tuna or fish from a store or restaurant, do not eat fish caught by family or friends that week. Check with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to see if there are any fish advisories for fishing locations in your area. Current fish advisories should be followed when planning your diet.

What is mercury and how does it get in to fish?

Mercury is a part of our natural world. It can also come from mining, burning trash, and burning coal. It can settle into lakes and rivers. Fish build up mercury in their bodies. All fish have some mercury in their bodies. Large fish and old fish have the most mercury in them. Mercury can not be removed by cooking the fish.

How can mercury affect my health and my children's health?

In adults, too much mercury can lead to problems of the central nervous system and possibly the cardiovascular system. Mercury can be passed from the mother to the unborn or breastfed baby. In a recent study, 1 in 10 mothers had mercury levels in their blood high enough to raise concern.

A young baby or child can't handle as much mercury as an adult. Mercury can damage a brain that is just starting to grow. The brain of an unborn baby, infant or child is growing rapidly, and is more sensitive to the effects of mercury. Too much mercury may affect a child's ability to learn later in life.

Should I still breastfeed my baby if I eat fish that contains mercury?

YES! Breastfeeding gives your baby health benefits that will last a lifetime. The benefits of breastfeeding far outweigh the risks of eating fish with mercury in it.

What if I have been eating more than 6 ounces of fish a week?

If you have been eating more than the suggested amount, do not panic. If you cut back the amount of fish you eat now, you will lower the amount of mercury in your body. About half of the mercury you have in your body will leave in a month. If you eat a lot of fish one week, just cut back for a week or two.

Recommendations for nursing mothers, women who are or may become pregnant, and children

- Limit yourself to 6 ounces of fish per week.
- Children under 6 years old should eat only 3 ounces per week.
- Check with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game for fish advisories in your area.
- Continue to breastfeed your baby.
- Remember, fish is a great source of low-fat protein. It also contains vitamins, minerals, and oils that are important for unborn and breastfed babies.

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